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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses a method of teaching values by using the lives of heroes as examples. The trend for teaching values is to offer methods of analysis and judgment that lead to answers about right and wrong, better and worse concerning personal behavior and common good. Stories about heroes have been identified as the means of teaching and learning values. Literature about heroes encourage emulation of particular virtues and desirable traits of character. Assisting students to examine the spirit of heroism is to invite them to adopt the spirit and embrace the qualities of the hero. Multi-media products and trade books offer the instructor resources beyond the standard textbook to develop the multi-dimensional qualities of heroes in depth. Resources chosen to teach about heroes should be accurate and balanced, considered carefully in context, and selected from various geographical locations and cultures. (JH)

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by Tony R. Sanchez

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# Using Stories about Heroes to Teach Values

**by Tony R. Sanchez**

**Recent Trends in Values Education.** There has been a renewal of concern during the 1990s about teaching and learning values — standards that everyone should have about what is good or bad. And leading educators have recommended stories about heroes as a main means of teaching and learning values.

Teaching methods that stress only cognitive skills in the analysis and clarification of choices about values have fallen from favor. The current trend is against teaching neutrally about values. Rather, the trend is for teaching values in concert with methods of analysis and judgment that yield answers about right and wrong, better and worse concerning personal behavior and the common good (Leming 1996).

Prominent educators recommend that certain widely held values or virtues should be at the core of the school curriculum for the purpose of systematically developing the character of students. They stress the integration of cognitive development and character development through "perspective-taking, moral reasoning, thoughtful decision-making, and moral self-knowledge" (Lickona 1993, 9). And they also urge the use of personal models—heroes—in history, fiction, and current events to exemplify and encourage emulation of particular virtues or desirable traits of character, such as honesty, civility, courage, perseverance, loyalty, self-restraint, compassion, tolerance, fairness, respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, responsibility for the common good, and so forth (Leming 1996; Lickona 1991).

Why and how should role models and heroes be used to teach values?

**Why Use Heroes To Teach Values?** A hero is a person (female or male) whose voluntary actions reflect the moral or ethical standards—the values—of a culture at a particular point in time. Some values that heroes exemplify, of course, transcend a particular time and place and may be viewed more broadly — even universally.

The genuine hero is not a mere celebrity or famous person. The heroic person expresses values through self-sacrificing acts that benefit others and the community. And others are inspired and united in recognition of the hero's selfless contributions to the common good. The self-promoting celebrity or notorious seeker of fame fails to meet the definition of hero (Sanchez 1998a).

Dramatic stories about female and male heroes in the literature of history and fiction are likely to attract the attention of learners, to arouse their interest, and to raise questions among them that lead to discussion and reflection about values. Further, stories about heroes provide examples of values that students can recognize and follow (Vitz 1990; Wynne and Ryan 1993).

Assisting students in examining the spirit of heroism through dramatic cases is to invite them to adopt that spirit themselves and to embrace the qualities of the hero. Morally, politically, and personally, stories of heroes can inspire students through the examples of their lives, for in many respects they promote a vision of the possibilities for heroism within each of us. "Whether in print, on the stage, or on film, the hearts and minds of children and youth can be engaged by heroes and heroines. There are lessons to be learned, hearts to be moved, and imaginations to be stimulated" (DeRoche and Williams 1998, 96).

The general public's acceptance of using stories about heroes to teach values is indicated by the popularity of William J. Bennett's best-selling *The Book of Virtues* (1993) and video programs based on the ideas and style of this publication. Teachers are likely to be encouraged by parents and community leaders to use cases of heroism to teach values associated with good character and responsible citizenship.

**How To Use Heroes To Teach Values.** Teaching values through stories of heroes requires the use of various instructional materials and procedures which transcend the standard textbook. Only through multi-media instruction can the multi-dimensional qualities of heroes be portrayed in depth. Biographies in film and books should be part of the core curriculum. The *PBS Video* catalog is an excellent source of biographies and documentaries suitable for classroom use. In particular, this catalog features *Adventures From The Book of Virtues*, six 30-minute video programs on perennial virtues—work, honesty, responsibility, compassion, courage, and self-discipline. These six programs depict heroic persons in stories that exemplify timeless values or virtues. To obtain these programs or the catalog, contact PBS Video at 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314-1698; telephone (800) 645-4727; FAX (703) 739-8131. You may contact PBS online <http://shop.pbs.org/> to select products for purchase.

Trade books for children and young adults by notable authors, such as Milton Meltzer, are excellent sources of stories about heroes and values for classroom use (Meltzer and Saul 1994). For example, Meltzer's *George Washington and the Birth of Our Nation* (published by Franklin Watts) is a balanced treatment of a great man which discusses both his strengths and weaknesses within the context of the American founding period. Other notable biographies by Meltzer are: *Lincoln: In His Own Words; Theodore Roosevelt and His America; Benjamin Franklin: The New American; Mary McLeod Bethune: Voice of Black Hope; Langston Hughes, A Biography;* and *Betty Friedan: A Voice for Women's Rights.*

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Stories of heroes should be accurate and balanced in presenting both positive and negative aspects of the person's life. Honest examinations of heroes' lives inevitably reveal human imperfections, which necessarily are part of the story of humanity at the center of values education. In terms of moral consistency, few heroes can be regarded as total successes.

Stories of heroes should be considered carefully in context. And judgments about the person's behavior should be made at first in terms of the culture of that person's time and place. Only after a context-based examination of the hero's deeds should there be consideration of the extent to which the person's actions, and the values they represent, transcend the time and place in which they occurred. Students should learn that certain core values are fundamental themes of humanity. The particularities of their expression may vary from one context to another, but such values as courage, perseverance, compassion, honesty, tolerance, and other traits of good character certainly are not restricted to the people of a particular time and place.

Stories of heroes should be selected from various cultures in different parts of the world (Helbig and Perkins 1997). And examples of values in these stories from throughout the world should be analyzed comparatively. By global and comparative examination of stories about heroic acts and the values they reflect, students will be encouraged to develop an understanding of the fundamental unity of humankind. They will be helped to appreciate the common qualities of humanity that pervade the diverse cultures of our world.

**References and ERIC Resources.** The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.


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